

THE ARTIST'S VOICE SINCE 1981 BOMBSITE

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Constant
by Linda Boersma
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Symbolische voorstelling van New Babylon (detail) (Symbolic Representation of New Babylon), 1969, collage on paper, 55 x 60". Photo: Victor E. Nieuwenhuys.

The Dutch artist Constant was born Constant Nieuwenhuys in 1920 in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. When I visit him in his studio [in the summer of 2003], he opens a good white wine, is slightly surprised when I decline to join him, and sits down in front of one his latest paintings, *Les Baigneuses (The Bathers)*, completed in 2003. For though Americans know him primarily as the conceptual architect of the *New Babylon*, a utopian and minutely detailed plan for the city of the future, Constant is a painter, and at the age of 83, he still paints—every day, in fact.

Constant's *New Babylon* project, which he worked on almost continuously from the middle of the 1950s up to the end of the '60s, has attracted renewed interest over the last few years. In 1999, it held center stage at a well-attended symposium that ran parallel to the exhibition *Constant's New Babylon: City for Another Life*, at the Drawing Center in New York. Constant had celebrated his 79th birthday that year, and Constant's *New Babylon* was his first solo exhibition in the United States. The previous year, an impressive study by Mark Wigley had appeared under the title *Constant's New Babylon: The Hyper-Architecture of Desire* (Witte de With/010, 1998). To mark this publication, the Rotterdam Witte de With center for art organized an exhibition that included drawings, plans and scale models of the *New Babylon* project. A remarkable event, because the Witte de With usually concerns itself exclusively with more contemporary art. Precisely the same held true of the Documenta exhibition in Kassel, Germany, where in the summer of 2002 the models of *New Babylon* were prominently presented, along with the oil paintings that show the labyrinthine spaces within.

"What is *New Babylon* actually?" Constant wrote in 1966. "Is it a social utopia? An urban architectural design? An artistic vision? A cultural revolution? A technical conquest? A solution of the practical problems of the industrial age?" He then answered himself: "Each of these questions touches an aspect of *New Babylon*." To put it briefly, *New Babylon* is a design for future architectural structures, made for a society of creative people who are freed from stultifying everyday work: "Homo Ludens" ("man the player"). The physical side of *New Babylon* consists of work on paper (sketches, designs, drawings, composite photographs and topological maps) as well as paintings and watercolors, intended to give an impression of the inner spaces of *New Babylon*, as well as dozens of extremely detailed models of the various sectors.

Constant's interest in architecture and urban development began early in the 1950s when all over Europe cities damaged during the war were being rebuilt. Constant addressed himself to the rational, monotonous functionalism then being utilized that he maintained would limit a free and creative life. In 1956 Constant became directly involved with International Lettrism, a movement set up four years earlier by the Frenchman Guy Debord, who in 1954 was already campaigning against functional building. (Debord's most famous, visionary text, *Society of the Spectacle*, would appear in 1967.) In June 1958, Constant joined the radical successor to Lettrism, the International Situationists. With Debord he formulated "unitary urbanism": the theory of the combined use of arts and techniques as a means of contributing to the construction of a unified milieu in dynamic relationship to experiments in behavior. In the intended social revolution the fine arts would play no role. The first scale model of *New Babylon* dates from that same year, 1958.

But before he received recognition for his *New Babylon* project, Constant had already made his name as one of the most important painters of the CoBrA avant-garde movement and as the engaged writer of its 1948 manifesto. In his most recent work, Constant measures himself against the old masters, and his paintings attest to a love for Delacroix and Titian. In enlivening clear tints, Constant paints flamenco dancers, Prometheus and Sade's Justine; but he also depicts the all-too-familiar endless columns of refugees and the homeless people he sees in his neighborhood in Amsterdam. What his paintings are about is no different from the subject of his paintings of devastated 1950s Europe and indeed of the *New Babylon* project itself, in which Homo Ludens, Man the Player, the free and creative nomad, takes space into his own hands: human existence

and the influence of circumstances against which life is played.



Constant and his dog, Summer 2003. Photo: Peer Veneman.

LINDA BOERSMA Constant, you have traveled a lot and lived and worked in many different places—but all within Europe, as far as I know. How many times have you been to the United States?

CONSTANT I've been to America once; or rather, to New York. That was in October and November of 1999, for the exhibition that Mark Wigley organized at the Drawing Center, and the symposium that was put together to accompany it.

LB Did you like it there?

C SoHo made me think of Amsterdam. But I didn't see much of the rest of New York. I went to the Metropolitan Museum every day, to look at paintings that I'd never seen before for real, and I was at the symposium, of course. That symposium was interesting, partly because of the discussion with Benjamin Buchloh.

LB During the symposium all the attention was focused on *New Babylon* and the architecture, and at the Drawing Center only works on paper that were related to

New Babylon were exhibited. There were no paintings by you to be seen in New York. Didn't that give a distorted view of your oeuvre? In Europe you're known as a painter first and foremost, from the CoBrA of the 1950s to the colorist compositions of today. But for the Americans you'll always be the conceptual architect of *New Babylon*, a project that you were finished with decades ago.

C Well, I did work on *New Babylon* for many years, of course, certainly 15 years, 10 of which I hardly painted at all. And anyway, my paintings have never been shown in America, so they don't know about them, I suppose. But I've also painted within the framework of the *New Babylon* project, and these have never been shown in the United States either. That should be rectified, I think. Because I'm a painter, of course. And I always have been, right from when I was young.

LB At the last Documenta exhibition, in Kassel, there was the same problem. You told me you had to fight to show the paintings that are part of the *New Babylon* project alongside the models themselves.

C Yes, that's quite right. This Documenta wasn't, generally speaking, an exhibition of paintings; there were only a few paintings to be seen in the whole Documenta. There is, I believe, a sort of anti-painting complex these days. But in a talk I had with Okwui Enwezor, about a year before Documenta, I said, "My paintings have to be included; otherwise it's not going to happen." At the time I'd done a whole series of paintings that were directly concerned with *New Babylon*. I'm not an architect, I'm a painter. I've always tried to hammer that home; you can't stifle my whole painting career just like that. Anyway, I came to Kassel on the third day before the official opening. My work was in a large space completely separate, in the Kulturbahnhof, which I liked. On the ground floor was Bodys Isek Kingelez, an African artist who also makes scale models. I liked the idea of that too. When I went upstairs I saw how my work had been installed with the paintings there, which naturally made the presentation of *New Babylon* much better.



Secteur Jaune (detail) (Yellow Sector), 1958, wood, metal, Plexiglas, 9 x 37 x 35".

LB Enwezor's Documenta was a very political exhibition. Did you feel any kinship with the other artists exhibiting there?

C No, not really. There was a lot of political work, but it was all videos and films. I find I can't watch one film after the other. I did look at them, but only quickly,

because I had my dog with me. But I can take things in very fast. When I see an exhibition, months afterward I can still discuss it in detail, while other people who walked around the exhibition for days have forgotten it completely. What did I like? Small drawings by Louise Bourgeois.

LB And what about Leon Golub?

C The American? Yes, I liked his work; that interested me. And I felt I was in good company with my neighbors in the Kulturbahnhof, [Walid Ra'ad's] Atlas Group.

LB When I saw the *New Babylon* paintings again at the Documenta, and when I looked at the photographs that were once taken of the models, then the interiors of *New Babylon* immediately made me think of the labyrinthine spaces that are now designed by computers and that you can enter virtually. In an interview that Rem Koolhaas conducted with you, you said you were building an enormous model that was intended to give a filmed impression of *New Babylon*. Has that ever taken place?

C No, not really. There were some films made, by my son and by some other filmmakers. But a real film, such as I had in mind then, where I could show the aim of *New Babylon* with explanations, that never happened. That's why I returned to painting: "illustrations" of *New Babylon*. What do you see when you walk through it? To show that, I had to return to painting. Plans for filming *New Babylon* always ended as a filmed interview with me. But I wanted someone to actually crawl inside those models with a camera. Because that's what it's about. What do you see when, once inside, you look around? The models are worked out in great detail. The whole project is now in the Municipal Museum in The Hague, and a filmmaker could quietly spend weeks or even months working there. I'm still waiting for someone to be able to do that. But of course, it can be done at any time, even after I'm dead, as the models are all available. I wouldn't sell any of it, as I feel *New Babylon* should stay together. It was a project that I worked on for a decade and a half. This whole studio was one great workshop. It was full of models, and I had several assistants working with me. Making the models was very labor intensive, and without assistants I could never have managed it. I sold my paintings from the CoBrA period and used the proceeds to finance the *New Babylon* project. Later, because I had studied architecture, I lived partly on commissions for rebuilding playgrounds and the like.

LB You studied architecture?

C Yes. For the *New Babylon* plan I naturally needed some architectural knowledge. Aldo van Eyck [a well-known Dutch architect and a friend of Constant's] showed me a few tips. "I'll give you my old course books, you can read those," he said. And that's what I did.

LB Did you ever get the urge to build a model that you yourself could walk into or to create an actual building or construction?

C No. I've never felt a need to do that. *New Babylon* is an idea. I've always called it an illustration. An illustration to my story about another form of urban construction. I made some models for this, here, in this space, but also limited by the space.



Entrée du Labyrinthe (Entrance of the Labyrinth), 1972, oil on canvas, 75 x 79". Photos: Victor E. Nieuwenhuys.

LB You were and you still are a painter—you always emphasize this. But how did your interest in architecture come about?

C That happened in Frankfurt at the beginning of the 1950s. I was alone with my son, who was seven at the time. It must have been 1951. Frankfurt was bombed flat during the war. I had been in Essen, Bochum . . . The Ruhr was not nearly as bad. Frankfurt was indescribable. I'd borrowed a studio from a painter who was himself in Paris. I was working there for an exhibition in the Zimmergalerie Franck, and every morning I took my son to school. The walk to the school was across an enormous bombsite. A great heap of rubble, with here and there some places that had been flattened so you could walk over them like paths. There were some outer walls of houses still standing. A doorway, and some stretches of wall. It was a surreal landscape, and it inspired me enormously. If you walk through a town that lies in ruins, then the first thing you naturally think of is building. And then, as you rebuild such a town, you wonder whether life there will be just the same, or what will be different. Then you think about the influence of the surroundings.

LB *New Babylon* began in 1958, or was it 1956?

C It began in 1956 with texts and drawings. One of the first projects, which formed the basis of *New Babylon*, came about in 1956 and was inspired by a gypsy camp in Alba, Italy, where I was living then. Guy Debord, who had founded the International Lettrists in 1952, came to visit me there. He lived in Paris, but his mother lived in Nice, and that isn't so far from the Italian border. The Lettrists had a mimeographed leaflet called *Potlach*, and they always sent me a copy. That leaflet interested me. I could sympathize with their criticism of architecture, so I started to write for the magazine *I.S.* or *International*

Situationist, which was also founded by Debord, sometime later, in 1956 or 1957. It was in this magazine that the first model of New Babylon was shown, in 1958. Situationism was about the creation of situations: *le création des situations*. We discussed other ways of living, and from there the discussion soon turned to living environments. And then it progressed to urban architecture. But I had already been studying the relationship between urban architecture and living environments. I had also published on the subject, and so I was asked to cooperate on the magazine, the *International Situationist*.

LB And you still continued to paint. At the beginning of the 1950s you made poignant paintings like *Terre Brûlée* (1951), which is an assimilation of the war and of such sights as you saw in Frankfurt. But also, and practically at the same time, you made abstract works like *Composition with 58 Cubes* (1953) and *Composition with Orange Triangle* (1953). I think these are fascinating compositions, but I find that they differ strongly from your other work.

C *Composition with Orange Triangle* was first a collage, then a painting. I colored the paper by hand, with watercolors. I made quite a few of these collages over a period of two or three years. And then I turned to spatial objects. After that I didn't paint anything for a long time, or hardly anything. *Adieu la P . . .* (*Farewell to P . . .*) from 1962 would have been the last painting. I did paint now and again. *Ode à l'Odéon* was my first painting after *New Babylon*. In 1968 there was the student uprising in Paris, where the Odéon theater was occupied. I was in Paris then, by chance on the Rue de l'Odéon. I saw it all from close by. *New Babylon* was a very extensive project that took up all my time until 1969. At that time, the whole studio was chock full of models. In 1969 I decided I was finished with *New Babylon* because I felt I had nothing to add to it. The Municipal Museum in The Hague bought most of the project over the following years. I needed space to paint.

LB And you still paint.

C Every day. I'm here from 12:30 to 7:30.



L'Incendie (The Fire), 1950, oil on canvas, 23 x 29". Photo: Victor E. Nieuwenhuys.

LB During the CoBrA time, the central idea was spontaneous creativity, like that of a child. Now, 50 years later, the painting tradition and the work of the old masters plays an essential role in your recent work. Do you think that has anything to do with being older?

C No. Absolutely not. I was interested in painting traditions when I was very young. Through exhibitions organized by the Amsterdam Stedelijk Museum I was also well informed about what was going on. For instance, in the exhibition *A Hundred Years of French Painting* I saw some important works by Delacroix. I saw these when I was still very young, about 16 or 17 years old. I have an enormously strong visual memory. And I speak French, and that was a great advantage, too. When I was 18 or 19, I became a student at the Amsterdam Rijksakademie, and the first thing I got out of the library—it had never been checked out before—was Delacroix's diaries, in three parts. And so I became an expert on Delacroix when hardly anyone in the Netherlands knew who he was. I think very highly of Delacroix, just as I do of Rubens, Titian and Rembrandt. Cézanne and Delacroix are for me the most important painters, they are my masters.

LB You once said that it isn't about individual expression, nor about an individual signature or cultivating the artistic genius, but the ideal is collective creation. Doesn't that contradict this?

C Well, there isn't any collectivism in painting. Although many of Titian's paintings that I like very much were completed by his students.

LB The ideal of collective creation, but also the motive behind the *New Babylon* project, was social engagement. The concept of *Homo Ludens* was at its core: the unfettered, creative man. It all speaks of resistance to violence and authority, while at the base lies in an ideal that you could characterize as Communist or Socialist. Are those the ideals that motivate you still?

C Yes, they are, but I make a distinction between "communism"—which doesn't exist anymore—and Marxism, a term that Marx himself would have nothing to do with. I have always been a great admirer of Karl Marx, I know his writings well, but I wouldn't call myself a Marxist. I call myself, in imitation of Henri Lefèbvre, whom I used to know well, a "Marxian." That means an admirer of Karl Marx.



Les Sans-Abri (The Homeless), 1998, oil on canvas, 68 x 65". Photo: Tom Haartsen.

LB You have painted in the expressive direct style that is typical of the work of the CoBrA movement; you have painted subdued abstract compositions, and now you paint almost transparent colorist canvases where the human figure and human feelings and relations—love, but also oppression and powerlessness—are central. These are thematic and stylistic changes but, you could say, that which you wanted to express has been constant?

C Constant? Yes, if you want to do justice to my name. Yes, of course. *(laughter)* But I have never sought for a style or a change of style. If I have used so many styles, then that is because I thought, "Painting is a profession, and you should be able to express anything you want, using painterly means, if you're a painter."

LB Not only have you painted your whole life, you have also written and published, you have built a visionary city and—not to be forgotten—made thread objects that, in my opinion, surpass those of Naum Gabo. You also play the guitar, the violin and the cymbals. You could have been a musician.

C No, I'm a painter. I've always been a painter. If I had become a musician, I would have had to give up painting. But I've played guitar all my life, from when I was 12 until today. I still play the cymbals every day too.

LB You're now 83. Is there something, looking back over your life, that you've have liked to do but couldn't?

C What I wanted to do but couldn't . . . [looks at his latest painting, *The*

Bathers] Yes, there is. I can't swim. There are not a lot of people who can't swim, and I'm one of them. When I was a child I had a kidney infection or something, and that's why I wasn't allowed to go in the water. So I never learned to swim. On vacations everyone went swimming and I just stayed sitting on the side.

Translated from Dutch by Sue Smit.

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